

1 (Part I)

LOS ANGELES TIMES
28 February 1987

FILE ONLY

After High Hopes for Mission, He Found 'Rug Merchants'**McFarlane Quickly Disillusioned in Iran**By BOB DROGIN, *Times Staff Writer*

WASHINGTON—When Robert C. McFarlane and a U.S. delegation secretly flew into Tehran last May 25, the former national security adviser held high hopes of arranging the release of all U.S. hostages and creating a historic diplomatic opening to the Iran regime—even inviting the Iranian prime minister to meet President Reagan in Washington.

But McFarlane quickly changed his mind. No one arrived to meet them for 1½ hours.

"It may be best for us to try to picture what it would be like if, after nuclear attack, a surviving Tatar became vice president; a recent grad student became secretary of state; and a bookie became the interlocutor for all discourse with foreign countries," McFarlane cabled Washington in despair, shortly after arriving.

"As we proceed, we cannot be gulled by promises of what will happen tomorrow—at bottom, they really are rug merchants," McFarlane added.

Detailed cables, memos and transcripts in the Tower Commission report shine an unaccustomed light on the cloak-and-dagger diplomacy of McFarlane's secret mission, in which the American officials carried false passports, used code names even among themselves, flew on unmarked Israeli jets and took along a kosher chocolate cake and six special Blackhawk .357 magnum pistols as tokens of good will.

Other than failure, McFarlane and his crew had only one worry: that they would be taken hostage themselves.

"It might be a very long time before anyone sees him again," then-National Security Council staff member Oliver L. North wrote to his boss, then-National Security Adviser John M. Poindexter, shortly before the group departed.

The six-man group—McFarlane, North, NSC official Howard Teicher, Farsi-speaking CIA consultant George Cave, Israeli official Amir Nir and a CIA communications

expert who stayed aboard the group's 707 jet—returned home in three days, however, after a fruitless and frustrating marathon of meetings with Iranian officials at the Independence Hotel in Tehran.

From the start, the two sides clashed. Iranian middleman Manucher Ghorbanifar apparently had told the Iranians that the U.S. delegation would bring 2,000 badly needed spare parts for Hawk missile batteries, or half the total Hawk spare parts that the U.S. had agreed to supply in exchange for release of the hostages.

Instead, the McFarlane group brought only one pallet of spare parts. A second 707 carrying more spare parts was turned back in mid-flight when no hostages were immediately released.

"This behavior raises doubts about what can be accomplished," an Iranian official said at the first two-hour meeting late Sunday, May 25.

'We Can Leave'

"I have come from U.S.A.," McFarlane angrily replied. "You are not dealing with Iraq. I did not have to bring anything. We can leave now!"

Tempers had barely cooled by the next afternoon. McFarlane initially refused to meet with the Iranian group, which included a deputy prime minister and an assistant to the prime minister, saying he expected to meet top-ranking officials.

"Before coming, my President and I believed preliminary problems affecting mutual trust were resolved by the staff," he later told the Iranians. "On your part, bringing about the release of hostages; on our part, providing some defensive supplies."

McFarlane said that "the more important purpose" was to "restore a basis of trust" between Iran and the United States. "There are crucial matters related to the Soviet Union, Afghanistan and Iraq that we should discuss."

Invitation Issued

He cautioned that he was scheduled to depart the next night, adding: "I hope your Minister

(Prime Minister Hussein Moussavi) will come to my country next year. He will be received by my President."

In the third meeting that night—which McFarlane avoided—the U.S. delegation offered even more.

"If your government can cause the release of the Americans held in Beirut, 10 hours after they are released, aircraft will arrive with Hawk missile parts," North told Iranian officials, including a senior foreign affairs adviser. "Within 10 days of deposit, two (Hawk) radars will be delivered. After that delivery, we would like to have our logistics and technical experts sit down with your experts to make a good determination of what is needed."

In addition, Cave offered "eight hours of briefing materials" on the Soviet military position around Iran after Teicher had summarized changes in Soviet military operations near Iran. A

The Iranians agreed to the briefing, but they did not offer the hostages in return.

"Our relations are dark. They are very bad . . . The Iranians are bitter. Many Iranians call America the 'Great Satan,'" the Iranian foreign affairs adviser said.